Group races the clock to close on tract of undeveloped forest

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Friends of Warner Parks are working to purchase a 322-acre patch of land owned by the H.G. Hill family. *Mary Agee*

“This is the forest primeval,” Henry Wadsworth Longfellow announces, rather portentously, at the opening of *Evangeline*. When Longfellow wrote his “Tale of Arcadie” in the mid-19th century, the poet was already recalling times past, memorializing the stands of ancient trees fallen to the logger’s axe as settlers spread across the continent.

Yet, just last Saturday I took a hike through an old growth forest. No, I wasn’t among the towering redwoods of California’s north coast. I was right here in Nashville, nine miles from downtown, on 322 acres called the Hill tract lying between the cars hurtling past on Highways 100 and 70 and surrounded by condo complexes, big boxes, strip malls and all the other impermanent structures of modern life.

My tour guide was Warner Bass, the founder of the Friends of Warner Parks and a grandson of Edwin Warner, for whom the park is named. Bass has been conducting visits to the forest as the leader of the effort by the Friends to acquire the tract.

The property was appraised for $17 million. But last June the Hill family, which owns it along with many other acres of Nashville real estate, agreed to discount the tab to $13.25 million for the Friends group.

Last week, the price tag dropped still further, to $10.8 million, of which the Friends have raised, in contributions and pledges, about $8.6 million. Those pledges include $1 million from Metro and $1.6 million from the state’s Tennessee Heritage Conservation Trust Fund.

But the clock is ticking. The condition for this lower rate is that by the end of January the Friends must commit to closing.

“We don’t have to have all the money in hand by then,” Bass explains. “But we have to know where the dollars are coming from to have the confidence necessary to borrow funds to bridge the gap to close the deal.”

Over the next month-and-a-half, Bass and Friends will be picking every pocket they can find. If the tract is bought and paid for, the Friends will turn it over to Metro Parks and Recreation, adding it to the already considerable breadth of Warner Parks — 2,684 acres, one of the largest municipal parks in the nation.

The Friends previously purchased, for $5.5 million, 130 acres flanking the Hill tract, which is shaped like a “T” with a fat head.

“Five years ago we learned of a developer planning multifamily for one piece on Highway 100 across from Warner Parks,” Bass says. “That parcel has on it the largest cave in Davidson County, which has great educational value.” The Friends realized that if this parcel fell to development, the others surrounding it would soon follow. So they raised the money and bought it, and subsequently acquired the other properties surrounding the Hill “T.”

Two years ago Hill representatives approached the Friends to offer their tract for sale. A timber appraisal for the land by Memphis forester Jeffrey Cooper “really caught our attention,” Bass says.

Cooper’s appraisal states “most of the forested acres are growing trees that exceed 200 years of age. …I’ve been working as a forester for over 30 years and in the Southeast it is unusual to find forests in this condition, even on national forests, wildlife refuges and national parks. Given the residential location of this property, it is even more impressive.”

Subsequent assessments by the Nature Conservancy and Vanderbilt University biologist Steven Baskauf confirm the rarity of the tract and its educational and research potential.

The land has been in the Hill family since grocery magnate and real estate entrepreneur Horace Greeley Hill bought the property sometime before 1910 hoping he could convince his wife, Mamie, to make it their home. He failed; she thought it too remote; the couple instead set up house at Hillwood. So H.G. ran cattle on the lowland part of his “remote” land and left the rest undisturbed.

It remains undisturbed still, at least by humans. On the morning of my visit, the ground was dusted with frost, the leaf carpet of early winter thick underfoot. Bass pointed with his walking stick to pock marks in the carpet under the white oaks.

“That’s where deer were looking for acorns. And we’ve heard there are bobcat in here,”

During my hike, I didn’t find Longfellow’s “murmuring pines and hemlocks” — this is the Upper South, after all, not Nova Scotia. But I did see huge specimens of oak and hickory, beech and ash, tulip poplar and sassafras, persimmon and pawpaw.

In their leafless state, the trees stood like monumental sculptures of various patinas. The trunk of a shagbark hickory looked as roughly textured as Jane Fonda’s hair in Klute. The tallest sugar maple I’ve ever seen — competing with oaks will do that — had a girth that took three sets of arms to encircle. The hollow remains of a long-dead chestnut commemorated the blight that devastated billions of these American giants in the early decades of the last century.

In his appraisal of the Hill tract, forester Cooper acknowledges the financial worth of the timber on the property as well as the site’s high value for development in such a hot growth location. But sometimes old growth has a value all its own. Disturbing the site, Cooper warns, “will ring a bell that can’t be un-rung. ”